

UMBERLAND

BOOK 2

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SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-0-545-95318-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, May 2017

Book design by Christopher Stengel

· A L Y S S A ·

The rancid scent of rotting flesh and the sound of distraught whimpers make my stomach turn. Controlling the urge to retch, I hum a lullaby as I sit near Bella's bed, made up of hay and old blankets, and administer another dose of painkillers. Her eyes flutter as she drifts into a haze. When the pixie-faced girl finally relaxes, I stand and stretch, working out the ache in my muscles. Gwen sits three beds over, her siblings, Mikey and Joanna, lying between us. They look so tiny tucked beneath their blankets. Having cried herself to sleep, Gwen's head rests on her forearm as she holds her mother's frail hand. The Professor, like Bella, is far worse than the others. Doc predicts it will be only a matter of days, if not hours, before we lose her to the disease. I feel a pang of sympathy as I think of watching my own parents die.

Daring a reluctant glance, my eyes scan the sea of people. Rows and rows of sick lie wailing on their beds, each in excruciating pain, their battle crueler than the day Captain Hanz Otto Oswald Kretschmer bombed London. There are so many, I'm not even sure where they've all come from. Alnwick Castle has become home for hundreds of refugees, some so sick they are beyond help. All I can do is keep them comfortable as their bodies blister and scab over . . . or die.

Bella, Gwen, and the Lost Boys arrived here only a few

months ago after narrowly escaping Captain Hook. With Hook dead, the Marauders no longer chase them, but I am not at all sure Alnwick Castle is any more of an improvement. Although the antidote has staved off death in some, the side effects are horrific. Guilt settles like a broken, jagged brick in my chest.

It was my decision to have those seeking refuge be treated with what I thought—what we all thought—was the cure. The temporary relief it brought was only an illusion.

Unable to look at the bedridden exiles any longer, I retreat to the doorway of the stables, our temporary infirmary, welcoming the chill of the early evening air. Horses no longer reside here. Instead the hay stalls have become beds to those who are sick. Others lie outside, bundled up in blankets between the guest hall and the clock tower.

I take a deep breath of fresh air as my eyes roam over the makeshift shanty homes that cover the outer courtyard of the castle grounds. What once were vibrant green grounds have become the foundation of a filthy refugee encampment. Fire pits built in old rubbish bins flicker, casting eerie shadows on the worn faces of those who gather around them. Though none are older than eighteen, nineteen at the most, the toll of death and disease has aged them years beyond their youth.

Shouts erupt, drawing my attention. A scrawny boy darts from a crowd and chases some sort of critter. Probably a rat since they outnumber us by the thousands, feasting on corpses that have yet to be disposed of far beyond the castle walls. The boy

stumbles, regains his balance, and throws his coat over the rodent, successfully capturing it. It takes only moments before he is surrounded by the others and a fight ensues, fists and boots leaving their marks on the boy's emaciated body. Drunk on fermented grains and potatoes, it is only the first of many brawls that will erupt this cool evening. With food scarce, the meager morsel would satisfy someone's hunger, at least for tonight. But in the melee, the rat manages to escape, dashing into the white rose bushes that line the castle walls. Somehow the rodents still flourish while we wither and rot. With a final kick to the boy's gut, the others leave and return to their fire pits. Wincing, I turn away. I know how this will end. Only the biggest and strongest survive.

Bella cries out. Rushing back to her side, I whisper soothing words in her ear until she quiets. Even in sleep, her face is etched with pain. It's the same expression I've seen time and time again, urging me to do something more than just sit idly by and watch those who have come to me for aid suffer. With so many dead or missing, the Queen of England has executive decree, but even she is too sick to rule. She's barely conscious these days. And with her younger sister not interested in stepping up, there's just me.

The rumble of disgruntled voices rises from outside, only this time my name is tossed about in harsh, angry tones. My guards, most of whom are former Lost Boys, shout warnings to stand down. Although they are skilled fighters, having battled the Bloodred Queen's men, they are young nonetheless, and the

refugees outnumber them ten to one. I snatch my sword and sheathe it in the scabbard on my hip. Wrapping my cerulean cloak around me, I pull up the hood over my head and race through the shadows of the shantytown's outskirts toward the castle, careful not to be seen. With guards busy quelling the commotion, I slip through the castle doors.

Just inside, I am greeted by Pete and Lily. They are armed and their expressions filled with worry.

"I've never seen them this hostile," Lily says.

"Me either. I need to get this under control now, before someone gets killed," I say.

"With all due respect, Your Grace, I think you should let the Lost Boys handle this," Pete says.

"I appreciate your concern, but this crowd is too much for them to handle on their own."

Pete's mouth opens as if he wants to protest, but instead he simply nods.

The hint of burning oak fills the air, casting a ghostly haze over the inner bailey. I try to calm my nerves before stepping back through the doors into the courtyard. When I do, all I can see are homes built of cardboard, scrap wood, and rusted metal stretching from within the inner castle grounds to beyond the stone walls. The structures threaten to topple the first time a severe storm hits. Scuffles have ensued between the rioters and the Lost Kids.

"Your attention," I say, projecting my voice as much as possible.

It takes a few moments, but soon the fights have died out and all eyes are on me.

“Your anger and frustration are warranted, that much I won’t deny. You were promised refuge here, and instead you continue to suffer from hunger and illness. But, as in the past, I implore to you to remain calm and peaceful while we figure out ways to help you.”

Rage-filled eyes glare at me. Armed with torches, sticks, and fistfuls of stones, the gathering of refugees holler obscenities. I will myself not to flee into the safety of the castle.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see that Lily and Pete now flank either side of me, their shoulders rolled back and weapons in hand—a reminder that there are those who will still fight for England’s royal family. Lily’s black-and-gold sari and Pete’s dark green coattails whip in the wind as they stand their ground. Many have stepped up, filling in the vacancies the Queen’s guard left behind as they succumbed to the Horologia virus. The sight of the exiles’ gaunt faces weighs heavy on me. The all-too-familiar sunken cheeks and hollow eyes don’t look too different from those who bravely try to maintain peace in spite of their growing hunger and weakening conditions.

As the crowd continues to shout, I hold up my white-gloved hands, which hide evidence of my own sickness. I try to quell the air of frustration, but any attempt to assure them that I’m doing everything within my power to help falls on deaf ears.

“What kind of duchess are you that you do nothing while your people die?” yells a boy, gripping a fiery torch. “You have failed us. You have failed those who have come to Alnwick seeking your help. You ought to be held responsible for your crimes.”

“We need a cure!” screams another boy, shaking a blistered and bloody fist in the air.

“There is no cure. I assure you I have people working around the clock seeking a new solution. Until then, we will continue to treat the symptoms as best we can. I ask for your continued patience.”

The irate throng erupts in allegations, accusing me of atrocious crimes.

“Lies!” a boy yells. A rock flies by my head and strikes the stone wall behind me. I’m shaken but unharmed.

Pete steps in front of me, pointing his daggers at the crowd. “Enough!”

Lily stands shoulder to shoulder with him, her sword drawn as a hushed murmur falls over the group. “Duchess Alyssa is doing everything she can to find you, to find all of us, the cure,” she says. “So unless you are here to offer your assistance, go back to your shelters or you will be arrested.”

The shouting of discontentment begins again. Lily takes me by the elbow and is leading me away when someone shouts, “Duchess Alyssa, just where do you think you’re going?”

The outskirts of the horde part as someone trudges forward with an air of boldness. Katt, the Queen of England’s kid sister,

holds an ungloved hand up, quelling the grumbling boys. As if under her spell, the refugees grow quiet. Finally, she grins with perfectly painted lips, a stark contrast to her white corset, lacy skirts, fishnet leggings, and white boots. Just a year younger than her sister, she is now as opposite from the Queen as night is from day. Even sick, the Queen possesses a grace and kindness that Katt once had. But with all that has happened to their former home of London, Katt's charming demeanor has bloomed into an icy bitterness.

She glares at me. I'm certain it is because, although she is the princess and rightful heir to the crown, she will never take the throne as long as I can help it. With the United Kingdom in chaos, very few trust those in power and I trust her even less. By aligning with the Poison Garden's caretaker and condoning his offer for assisted suicide of the sick, she has forfeited her right to the crown, not by law but by sheer betrayal.

I step forward, ready to face whatever Katt has to hurl at me, whether it be stones or harsh words. Lily flashes me a worried glance, but I give her a nod, letting her know that I can hold my own.

"Princess Katt, you look well. Have you come back to denounce your alliance with Maddox Hadder?" I ask.

"Hardly," she sneers.

Taking a breath in, I stand a little taller. "Unless you cut your ties with him you are no longer welcome here."

"Turn on the only person, the only means that has helped these people? No thank you. These people don't want to be

placated with false hopes and promises of a future that will never exist. They are dying! *We* are dying. What is needed is someone to stand by them while they take their last breath, hold their hand when the pain is too much. I am where I need to be, with and among my people. Not holed up in some castle, pretending to know what I'm doing," Katt says, gesturing to the crowd. "*This* is where I belong. This is what a real queen does."

The group with her roars in solidarity.

Katt points a clawlike finger at Pete. "And you, Pete, this is equally your fault. No, perhaps it's actually *all* your fault. You brought us the antidote. We were coping just fine here in Northumberland. Then you showed up with your miracle cure, and now we're all as good as dead."

Pete frowns. Her accusations are unfair and I know they slice him to bits, each allegation like a newly sharpened knife to his heart. He already blames himself for the predicament we're in. It's a burden too large for any one person to bear. The added accusation must devastate him.

With the help of medications being sent by the Professor, Northumberland and its residents were managing, but when Pete arrived with a cure, the Queen jumped on the opportunity to help everyone in spite of the Professor's warning that it needed further testing. We had no idea that the positive results would only be a temporary relief of what was yet to come.

"But since you haven't found the cure, as rightful heir to the crown I have no other choice but to find it elsewhere," Katt declares in a singsong voice.

“Between the Professor’s research and Doc’s knowledge of the virus, *we* have the best chance of creating the cure. Who else could possibly help you?” I demand. And even though I don’t trust her, my heart beats wildly at the small hope that Katt might actually know of an antidote, or at least someone who can create it. However, if she truly did, she would have saved herself months ago.

“I have my resources,” she says airily. “You’ve had plenty of time to fix this and still, kids are dying daily. Since you can’t save us, I’ve found someone else who can.”

“Who?” I ask.

As if on cue, music booms in the distance on the southeastern horizon. Beyond the shantytown, torchlight flickers like fireflies. Of the many gardens that once adorned Alnwick’s grounds, the only one to survive is the Poison Garden.

With a wave of her hand and a swish of her skirt, Katt turns toward the music. “Come. Maddox calls,” she says. “I’ll be back, Duchess Alyssa, and next time I won’t be kind. So figure something out.”

Katt leads the group down a cobblestone walkway and through the southern gates of the stone barbican. A few, too intoxicated to notice the group’s departure, linger, continuing to cast insults at me. I can hardly breathe knowing that I have lost the trust of Princess Katt and someone else has gained it. Someone who may not have the survivors’ best interests in mind.